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Participation of volunteers, "White Helmets", in activities of the United Nations in the field of humanitarian relief, rehabilitation and technical cooperation for development

Report of the Secretary-General

Addendum

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. In resolution 49/139 B of 20 December 1994, entitled "Participation of volunteers, 'White Helmets', in activities of the United Nations in the field of humanitarian relief, rehabilitation and technical cooperation for development", the General Assembly, inter alia, requested the Secretary-General to submit a report to the Economic and Social Council at its next substantive session, incorporating the views expressed by Governments and appropriate intergovernmental organizations and relevant entities within the United Nations system, in particular the Department of Humanitarian Affairs of the Secretariat and the United Nations Volunteers programme (UNV), on ways and means of strengthening national and regional stand-by arrangements, including the establishment and full utilization of national volunteer corps, in the area of emergency humanitarian assistance, as well as in the promotion of a smooth transition from relief to rehabilitation, reconstruction and development, bearing in mind existing mandates and activities of the United Nations system.

2. The General Assembly invited the Secretary-General, in this context, to include in his report the results of his assessment of the potential of:

(a) The provision by the Department and UNV of coordination for activities to be undertaken by national volunteer corps, including the supportive role of the Resident Coordinator at the country level;

(b) The establishment of a distinct window within the Special Voluntary Fund of UNV for channelling funds for operational purposes;

(c) The use of databases within the United Nations system to coordinate and facilitate the rapid provision of assistance by national volunteer corps to the United Nations system;

(d) Experiences at the national level with regard to, inter alia, selection and training, deployment, status and security, and the effective utilization of stand-by arrangements.

II. VIEWS AND COMMENTS ON THE "WHITE HELMET" INITIATIVE

3. The Secretary-General invited Governments, intergovernmental organizations and relevant entities within the United Nations to express their views on the "White Helmet" (WH) initiative and on the implementation of the General Assembly resolution.

A. Views expressed by Governments

4. Twenty-three Governments (Argentina, Australia, Bolivia, Bulgaria, Chile, Ecuador, Germany, Israel, Italy, Japan, Malaysia, Malta, New Zealand, Paraguay, Peru, Poland, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the United States of America, Uruguay and Zambia)

responded to the Secretary-General's letter. Twenty-two Governments endorsed the WH initiative and expressed their willingness to participate in its immediate realization. Fifteen Governments also declared their willingness to play an appropriate role in matters relating to the training of such national volunteer corps.

5. The question of the financing of WH volunteer corps brought out a more diverse set of responses from Governments. Only one Government pledged a financial contribution to the WH fund, while six Governments expressed their willingness to do so. In their responses, three Governments referred to the possibility of private sector financing for the initiative.

B. Views expressed by intergovernmental organizations

6. The Organization of African Unity expressed active interest in obtaining WH support in some of the relevant operations undertaken by its member States. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe conveyed its interest in the initiative and in identifying ways to help in its financing, as well as its willingness to collaborate as far as training was concerned.

C. Views expressed by entities within the United Nations system

7. Responses were received from 14 relevant entities within the United Nations system. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations welcomed the initiative, indicating interest in the use of qualified volunteers, and agreed to assist in training and in seeking funding. The International Labour Organization conveyed its wish to participate in the initiative, as necessary, and listed several areas of specific interest where trained volunteers would be appreciated. Special reference was made to the training facility in Turin and the role it could play in preparing national volunteer corps for United Nations service. The International Maritime Organization expressed keen interest in the WH initiative and drew attention to its need for highly specialized staff. The Universal Postal Union indicated that its emergency work required volunteer staff and, therefore, it would participate in the WH initiative. However, it was not in a position to offer either training or financing. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization supported the idea of WH volunteers and agreed to consider their use, training and possible funding. The World Health Organization also welcomed the initiative and agreed that it could help provide needed health support in the context of relief, rehabilitation and development assistance, as well as assist in strengthening cooperation between developing countries. It stressed the importance of relating the volunteer corps closely to the agency staff active in the field and stated its willingness to offer advice for the training of such volunteers. It also maintained that the financing requirements would have to be met through additional contributions before the WH initiative could become operational. The International Fund for Agricultural Development stated that its functions did not relate to the inquiry.

8. Within the United Nations itself, the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat) affirmed its interest in participating in the WH initiative. However, it did not foresee any role in the training of volunteers or in financing the initiative. The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development also conveyed its interest in qualified national volunteers in a variety of technical cooperation tasks undertaken by the organization. The United Nations Population Fund responded favourably to the inquiry and offered to assist in the training and, to some extent, the financing of national volunteer corps.

9. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) stated that it had worked for years with stand-by capacities drawn from several non-governmental organizations and from UNV, reflecting the profile required for refugee-related field work. These special arrangements had proved to be cost-effective and were expected to fulfil many staff requirements of UNHCR; however, to the extent WH volunteers were integrated into UNV, UNHCR would welcome cooperation, particulary in strengthening capacity in specialized fields. The United Nations Children's Fund also expressed interest in taking part in the WH initiative and agreed to play a role in the training of such volunteers and to help seek funding for the initiative. The World Food Programme welcomed the WH initiative and elaborated on the practical implications of using local staff in relief operations. It agreed, in principle, to participate on an "as necessary" basis. It expressed willingness to offer advice on training needs and recalled its financial dependence on the donor community. Two regional commissions, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean and the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, replied that the use of WH volunteers, by them, was not considered likely at the present time.

10. In order to consult as broadly as possible, letters of inquiry were also addressed to United Nations Resident Coordinators. While many Governments have not yet formally responded to the Secretary-General's letter, several discussed with the respective field offices issues relating to the WH initiative. These discussions also served to clarify what the local authorities would need to do in preparing national personnel for participating in the envisaged volunteer corps.

III. DEPARTMENT OF HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS AND UNITED NATIONS VOLUNTEERS: PARTNERS IN HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE OPERATIONS

11. The General Assembly, in its resolution 49/139 B, called on the United Nations system, and in particular the Department of Humanitarian Affairs and UNV, to contemplate and encourage the use of WH expertise available from the newly created national volunteer corps to support activities in the area of emergency humanitarian assistance, as well as in the promotion of a smooth transition from relief to rehabilitation, reconstruction and development.

A. Department of Humanitarian Affairs

12. The primary role of the Emergency Relief Coordinator and Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, on behalf of the Secretary-General of the United Nations, is to facilitate a coherent, coordinated and timely response by the United Nations system to emergencies and natural disasters.

13. The Emergency Relief Coordinator takes the lead in securing agreement on the division of responsibilities among organizations of the United Nations system in responding to emergency situations in accordance with their respective mandates. The Coordinator is also responsible for establishing coordination mechanisms, organizing needs assessment missions, preparing consolidated appeals and mobilizing resources; facilitating access to populations in need and ensuring that emergency assistance is provided in ways that are supportive of recovery and longer-term development so as to reduce dependency on emergency relief. The Coordinator provides guidance to United Nations Resident Coordinators on the exercise of their responsibility, under normal circumstances, for coordinating humanitarian assistance of the United Nations system at the country level. The Coordinator is responsible, in particular, for facilitating the preparedness of the United Nations system, assisting in the transition from relief to development and promoting the use of locally or regionally available relief capacities.

B. United Nations Volunteers

14. The United Nations Volunteers programme was established on 1 January 1971. In accordance with the provisions of General Assembly resolution 2659 (XXV) of 7 December 1970, UNV was placed under the administrative auspices of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and charged to work "in collaboration with the United Nations agencies concerned".

15. The nature and scope of its mandate has enabled UNV to participate, as an integral partner, in various peace-keeping and peace-building operations, humanitarian relief, and rehabilitation and development programmes, as well as in activities in support of democratization processes. The role played by UNV within the United Nations system as a whole is now well recognized and appreciated and has resulted in calls for increased use of UNV-provided personnel in the above-mentioned operations.

IV. STRENGTHENING NATIONAL AND REGIONAL STAND-BY ARRANGEMENTS

A. Experience

16. The Department of Humanitarian Affairs has considerable experience in developing and maintaining stand-by arrangements, especially for responding to natural disasters. Two such specific capacities relate to the United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC) teams and the Military and Civil Defence Assets (MCDA) project. UNDAC teams have successfully assisted in responding to numerous disaster situations. The teams comprise national experts whose stand-by availability is agreed upon between the Governments and the

Department. The experts collaborate closely with United Nations personnel. While specialized training of the teams is the responsibility of the national Government, additional training is provided by the Department for the purposes of their deployment to ensure their full effectiveness. The teams are financed and maintained by national Governments. In certain cases, national Governments also finance their deployment.

17. The MCDA project provides for the utilization of military and civil defence assets to support the United Nations system in its response to natural disasters. Guidelines for the use of MCDA in international response to natural, technological and environmental emergencies have been finalized. Arrangements have also been made to identify training requirements for MCDA military and civil defence personnel and to design appropriate curricula. Several field-based exercises have helped prepare participants in the actual use of MCDA in simulated disaster-relief situations.

18. The experience of the Department with UNDAC and MCDA can be brought to bear on the key issues relating to the availability, training and deployment of stand-by national teams in the implementation of the WH initiative.

19. The United Nations Volunteers programme has, through the development of new strategies, linkages with national providers of volunteer professionals and partnerships with United Nations system organizations. It has demonstrated a capacity for rapidly fielding large numbers of volunteers in support of United Nations field operations. Since its first activities with the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance to Afghanistan (UNOCHA) and the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC), to the more recent United Nations Operation in Mozambique (ONUMOZ) and United Nations Operation in Somalia (UNOSOM), and including current operations such as the United Nations Observer Mission in Liberia (UNOMIL), the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR), the United Nations Mission in Haiti (UNMIH), and the United Nations Mission for Verification of Human Rights and Compliance with Comprehensive Agreements on Human Rights in Guatemala (MINUGUA), more than 2,000 UNV volunteers have served or are serving in humanitarian and emergency relief, rehabilitation, reconstruction, repatriation, human rights and electoral programmes. 1/

20. As the initiator of the WH project, the Government of Argentina has established a Comisión de Lucha Contra el Hambre y la Pobreza. The Commission and UNV have collaborated on the elaboration of the WH initiative and on developing a workable model within the framework envisaged by the General Assembly in resolution 49/139 B.

21. Through their collaborative efforts, the Commission and UNV are seeking to develop the capacity to provide, through UNV, volunteer expertise for United Nations organizations for effective and rapid response. The increased capacity of the Commission, as well as the deployment and utilization of teams identified and constituted through it, will enable it to participate in and contribute substantially to relevant United Nations operations. Initial proposals being considered in this context include projects in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bolivia, Haiti and Gaza.

22. The model, once refined, could help guide the WH process and may be replicated for other national volunteer corps, with adaptations as required on a country-by-country basis.

B. Areas of possible utilization

23. The number, size and complexity of United Nations operations have grown significantly in recent years. They increasingly extend beyond traditional roles to cover a broad range of functions, from humanitarian relief assistance in complex emergencies to repatriation and resettlement, restoration of infrastructures and social services, community-level post-conflict confidence-building, conflict prevention/resolution, assistance in human rights monitoring and electoral processes, as well as in administration and management. In situations of complex emergencies, their activities are expected to focus, at least initially, on emergency response and early stages of rehabilitation.

24. The WH process could facilitate the mobilization of existing local expertise, revitalize previously constituted local non-governmental organizations and community-based organizations, as well as help in the organization and promotion of new arrangements.

25. The UNV programme has consistently sought to promote participatory processes by using appropriate volunteer modalities, including mixed teams of international and national personnel, and by creating direct linkages between UNV specialists and local populations. The basic premise of UNV is that, whatever the circumstance, the populations concerned must have the right, and the ability, to influence actions affecting their lives. Local capacities for voluntarism would be promoted and strengthened.

26. Based on past experience where United Nations volunteers, in collaboration with United Nations bodies, have assisted in a diverse range of activities, WH deployment could include:

(a) Assuring the delivery of urgent food and non-food relief supplies (e.g., housing) and services (e.g., basic health, sanitation, epidemiology) to victims of forced migration;

(b) Providing support to local emergency relief coordinating units, including necessary skills and local managerial capacity to support effective access to afflicted populations;

(c) Assisting in registration for return, and in logistical and technical arrangements for resettlement and repatriation, of refugees and internally displaced persons;

(d) Assisting in monitoring respect for, and enabling protection of, human rights, together with measures for confidence-building and conflict prevention/resolution at the community level;

(e) Assisting in demobilizing, retraining and reintegration efforts;

(f) Supporting the reorganization/operation of local services (for example, health centres, food distribution, housing);

(g) Enabling the victims of forced population movements to return to their countries of origin or to integrate in their countries of refuge.

C. Coordination arrangements for the "White Helmet" initiative

27. In accordance with its mandate, the Department of Humanitarian Affairs would ensure the necessary coordination in the field. In close consultation with United Nations Resident Coordinators and together with its operational partners, the Department would assess the need for additional personnel in a particular emergency situation and identify with UNV the special skills and volunteer component strength required.

28. Mechanisms already exist for the ad hoc fielding of teams in the earliest stages of emergency and the identification and recruitment of personnel required to meet needs in emergency and related operations. Implementation of the WH initiative would involve adding to these mechanisms certain arrangements, under the aegis of the Department and UNV, to address inter alia the following:

(a) The identification and definition of appropriate sectors for WH involvement;

(b) Establishing respective responsibilities in mission assessment and planning activities, professional categories, and composition of field teams, as well as essential professional qualifications of personnel required;

(c) Screening and selecting stand-by WH teams and team members available for deployment on short notice;

(d) Ensuring, as appropriate, in accordance with distribution of WH teams, ethnic and geographic diversity and gender sensitivity;

(e) Deployment time and procedures for fielding of WH teams and volunteers;

(f) Status and conditions of service for WH personnel within the overall framework of conditions of service for United Nations field personnel;

(g) Financial and accountability arrangements and requirements;

(h) Modalities for integration of WH personnel, individually or in field teams, within the operational structure of the missions;

(i) Reporting channels, procedures and requirements.

D. Financing

29. The viability of the WH initiative is ultimately predicated on the availability of financing for their training and deployment. As stipulated in General Assembly resolution 43/139 B, UNV has established a separate account within its Special Voluntary Fund for contributions for the implementation of activities envisaged for the WH initiative. Only one Government has so far committed funds to the initiative, while some have expressed interest and others have referred to the possibility of private sector financing.

30. The Department of Humanitarian Affairs is prepared to explore in general, as well as for specific cases, the use of the consolidated appeal process for WH-related fund-raising. The way in which consolidated appeals are currently framed would make it possible, once the initiative becomes operational and volunteer teams are available for field assignments, to include in such appeals a provision for the financing of the use of WH volunteers in United Nations operations. The existing shortfalls in relief funding should, however, be borne in mind in this context.

E. Databases and other arrangements to facilitate the rapid utilization and deployment of "White Helmets"

31. UNV maintains a roster of candidates as the central component of the process of matching suitable candidates with identified needs. Organized according to areas of UNV interventions, the roster lists several thousand candidates distributed among major occupational groups and subdivided into professional categories. The composition of the roster is determined by demand and supply considerations and takes into account such additional elements as nationality, gender and language skills.

32. The strengthening of national arrangements and the development of national volunteers sending capacity are integral components of the UNV mandate. On this basis, UNV would endeavour to develop arrangements that would ensure the most effective cooperation with the providers of WH volunteers.

33. UNV operates within the UNDP network of field offices and maintains national focal points in developing countries, as well as cooperating organizations in 39 industrialized countries. In addition to these traditional recruitment partners, UNV occasionally calls on professional associations, educational institutions and other organizations specializing in a particular field, and/or undertakes targeted advertising and recruitment campaigns when required to supplement or replenish its roster.

34. In support of the WH initiative and to meet needs identified in the field, a decentralized model of national participants, which includes information on types of teams ready for deployment and functional areas of expertise, could be envisaged as part of an overall roster system maintained by UNV in accordance with the parameters defined by the Department of Humanitarian Affairs and UNV.

35. National participating organizations would be expected to constitute teams of qualified volunteers (perhaps focusing on a limited number of areas of

coverage identified by each organization), assure their specialized training and facilitate the rapid deployment and integration of such teams, including the building of linkages with local non-governmental organizations and community-based organizations in the receiving countries. To the extent possible, national participating organizations would identify and pre-position equipment and material necessary for effective operations once fielded. The Department and UNV would create teams from the groups of nationals from the participating countries. In this regard, care would also need to be taken to avoid imbalance between countries providing volunteers.

36. UNV and the Department would aim to develop an information-sharing system that would assure the effective management of the decentralized model.

37. The goal would be to have an arrangement whereby the United Nations system, through appropriate collaboration between the Department and UNV, could call on the national participants to provide teams, groups or individuals with the relevant expertise, without further screening and using streamlined administrative procedures.

F. Training programmes for "White Helmets"

38. Recognizing that experience in a particular field, alone, is not always sufficient to enable a skilled professional to be successfully fielded and to function within the context of United Nations operations, UNV would seek, subject to the availability of resources, to develop and present various orientation and training programmes, including, as appropriate, utilizing existing modules such as the Disaster Management Training Programme, tailored for the specific needs of the WH volunteers. Accordingly, a series of training programmes, with the following components, could be envisaged:

(a) The basic training programme could include elements relating to substantive aspects of the assignments, including:

(i) Structure of the United Nations system;

(ii) Disaster Management Training Programme background and objectives;

(iii) Disaster assessment/vulnerability and risk assessment;

(iv) Displaced persons in civil conflict;

(v) Information management and communications;

(vi) International humanitarian law;

(vii) Stress management;

(viii) Participatory approaches;

(ix) Administrative issues, including logistics, communications and reporting procedures;

(b) Other training programmes, organized and conducted on a mission-by-mission basis as required by the prevailing circumstances, could consist of aspects relating to the country of assignment, including:

(i) Language training;

(ii) In-country conditions;

(iii) Cultural sensitization;

(c) Training programmes could also be developed that focus on personal security matters, addressing the following:

(i) Attitudinal and behavioral factors;

(ii) Communications procedures;

(iii) First aid procedures;

(iv) Local political conditions, local reaction to the United Nations, special sensitivities, as well as public conduct.

39. The investment in training should provide benefits in terms of better understanding and quicker integration of WH volunteers into new missions, while reducing risks of maladjustment. Existing training programmes could be updated and expanded in consultation with the Department of Humanitarian Affairs and operational agencies to ensure adequate training resources and facilities according to anticipated needs. As the WH initiative matures with field experience, training responsibilities could be transferred to the field level.

G. Status and security of "White Helmets"

40. Volunteers selected to participate in WH activities would be contracted by, and would serve under conditions of service applicable to the assignment and other rules and regulations of, UNV (including the Code of Conduct and applicable United Nations security guidelines and procedures).

41. In the performance of their duties, volunteers would follow the overall administrative rules and procedures of United Nations structure in the country of assignment. UNV, through its in-country UNV Programme Officer, Programme Administration and Support Unit, or similar structures, would assure the proper and effective field administration and management of WH volunteers within the overall system of adminstration and management of UNV.

42. Substantive technical backstopping, including in-work planning and implementation, would be provided by the United Nations organizations concerned or recipient national institutions to which WH volunteers would be assigned.

V. CONCLUSIONS

43. The adoption of General Assembly resolution 49/139 B, in the light of the growing demands for manpower and funds to mitigate the suffering and destruction caused by numerous emergencies, represents an innovative opportunity for the effective, efficient and economical provision of assistance to the intended beneficiaries of the United Nations system's operations, tapping existing but as yet unstructured and therefore unrealized sources of volunteer expertise. More than merely providing a new human resource base, the WH initiative presents a new opportunity for creative and resourceful programme design, formulation and implementation.

44. The WH initiative, however, can become viable only if and when Governments set up or encourage the creation of national volunteer corps and provide the necessary financial resources for their operation. Once nominations of such volunteer teams are finalized, UNV would store such information in a central database, and update it, as necessary, along the lines of its practice in dealing with individual volunteers.

45. Once several volunteer teams have served successfully under United Nations auspices, experiences gained would help identify the lacunae in the evolving volunteer service scheme. This experience would also allow for the review of various aspects of the arrangement, such as coordinated preparedness, planning, continuing government support and advocacy, and ways and means to enhance the effectiveness, efficiency and economy of the deployment of WH volunteers.

46. Governments are invited to provide the necessary financial support and take the necessary measures to set up national volunteer teams in order to achieve the objectives of the WH initiative.

Notes

1/ For example, in Cambodia, close to 800 district electoral supervisors, camp officers, engineers and mechanics were provided for UNTAC; in Mozambique, nearly 100 camp and operations officers and 150 electoral support officers served; in South Africa, 205 UNV specialists supported UNOMSA; more than 100 volunteers served during the course of UNOSOM; and more than 70 volunteers are serving under recruitment in MINUGUA, UNAMIR, UNMIH and UNAVEM. In Afghanistan, Burundi, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Iraq, Liberia, Malawi and the former Yugoslavia, volunteers are serving as protection officers, logisticians, food-aid monitors and civics educators, conflict prevention and resolution specialists, medical services personnel, relief coordinators, construction managers and engineers, urban planners and architects, air traffic controllers, fleet maintenance specialists, radio and telecommunications specialists, disaster-preparedness planners and social services specialists.